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A.NOLEN

Assaulting Mt. Helicon: Writing and Current Affairs.

monthly archives: FEBRUARY 2013

PRINCE DARLING

Fairy tales can be excellent examples of effective writing, because they're designed to be told, or at least read aloud. The audience must always be paramount for a successful fairy tale, and usually the fairy tales that survive have been vetted by generations of listeners.

So I'm going to analyze a fairy tale today, Prince Darling, which was published as part of *Le Cabinet des fées*, 1785-89. This tale has stayed with us a long time and proven its worth.

There are two parts to this story: the delivery and the message.

First, the delivery. Events in the story are presented chronologically. We meet the good-king father, the Fairy Truth, then finally the protagonist Prince Darling. The prince's character is the only one that is really developed, because the story is driven by how he learns to be a good king like his dad. There is no energy wasted on embroidering parts of the story that are not central to the prince's journey; we are told that the story is about the prince's journey in the first few lines. No tricks, no twists, just one relevant event following the other.

This story would (probably) have been more fun for the AUTHOR if they'd been able to embellish the Fairy Truth, or SHOWED that the father was good instead of TELLING us that he was good. But SHOWING takes more words, and consequently, more energy from the listener. Therefore, SHOWING is saved for the character of Prince Darling alone.

Wherever possible, events are described through dialogue between two characters. I've talked about the eavesdropping principle elsewhere, so I won't elaborate.

The growth of Prince Darling is what drives this story, and that brings me on to the message. The message is: good behavior is rewarded by love and contentment. The spoiled prince doesn't get this at first, he refuses to see how his own actions lead to his own misery. The conflict, suspense and emotional-roller-coaster come from Darling's struggle with himself during his quest for knowledge. If Darling was a narcissistic-type character, there'd be no story here, because he'd never draw the connection between HIS actions and the consequences of HIS actions. Darling would perpetually blame the fairy for his troubles. Boring!

The story is not boring because Darling is a sympathetic character deep down. This sympathy comes (mostly) from the prince's willingness to improve himself, but also because he doesn't always act as he should and feels bad about it later. The listener can relate to Prince Darling.

The storyteller's choice of message, and his medium the fairy-tale, are constraints on where this story can go. (Good constraints, from the listener's point of view!) The teller must be spare with words, and every event must serve to push Darling further towards the goal of self-knowledge.

A little while ago I wrote about how writers can't please everyone, and you really must be on the same wavelength as the people you want to entertain. *Prince Darling* is a good example of this, and there are a few things that make this tale distinctly Northern-European. Firstly, to kick a dog is considered bad, as is a king who acts arbitrarily. These values are not equated with anti-social behavior everywhere, and in much of the world this story would ring false because of these assumptions. No matter though, because the story originated in Europe for a European audience. (I'm not sure that there are stories which work universally.)

Secondly, there is only one surname used in this tale, “Suilman”. All the other names are based on aspects of the character to whom the appellation belongs. *Le Cabinet des fées* is a French collection of stories which were brought together just a few years before the revolution in 1789 and published in Amsterdam (*not* Paris). Suilman is an Irish surname.

Why would Prince Darling’s tutor have an Irish name? I can only speculate, but…

The Irish in France are famous for their military service as part of the Irish Brigade. These fairy tales were published at a time of political unrest in France; in 1792 the fraction of the Irish Brigade that supported the King was sent packing, while the remainder hung around to help the Revolutionary government. That didn’t work out so well for them, because in a couple years the Irish officers who stayed were either fragged or beheaded in The Terror.

I can see how a story about the wise old Irish educating a ‘good ruler’ may have propaganda value for somebody hiding in Holland circa 1787. That aside, the story itself is older than the politics of Revolutionary France and has good lessons for everybody.

Final thought: some opinionated stories are preachy and fail because of it. Prince Darling isn’t preachy, because the story presents a truth rather than an opinion. If one behaves in an anti-social, selfish, narcissistic way then one *will* end up depressed and running from oneself through busy-work, alcohol or some other numbing-tool. One will end up *unhappy*. That’s not an opinion, it’s a promise.

LEAVE A COMMENT

ALL I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS

From the folks who brought you “Winnie the Pooh”.

If I could have anything I wanted, I’d wish that everyday people develop an adversarial relationship with The Media.

In some countries, this relationship already exists. I have yet to meet a Russian who believes in RIA Novosti; there are plenty of Arabs who see through their national news agencies and *Al Jazeera*. People who expect hostility from their government tend to understand the relationship between government and The Media, and these people are distrustful of both.

I use ‘The Media’ broadly: The Media is not only television, newspaper, radio and film production, but publishing and academia too. These are all avenues for teaching, and in the USA at least, academic success is measured in terms of media exposure. Publish or Perish!

Sadly in the States, most people do not have an adversarial relationship with The Media. The Media is a warm, comforting socket that they plug into after work in order to forget all the crap that’s passed that day. It’s where they are reassured by messages that they’ve heard one thousand times before. Where they learn which ideas are good and bad, which people are good and bad and the ‘right’ way to act. Americans trust The Media; even the ones who growl at MSNBC or Fox will zone out in front of *Real Housewives* or *The Walking Dead*. They sit there, ‘resting’, passively absorbing the messages beamed at them out of New York, D.C. and L.A. They read the hot reads from the NYRB. They listen to the comfortable bobble-heads on NPR, public television and C-SPAN.

(Maybe the reason why websites like couchtuner.eu haven’t been closed is because getting people to watch is more valuable than selling cable subscriptions.)

Americans may be complacent about their own media, but their attitude to foreign news services is very different. I had a secretary from *The Washington Post* scoff at me once, because I quoted an article from *Russia Today*.

“You read that shit?” she demanded.

“Yes, ” I replied. “I read your shit too.”

Actually, this was a sad conversation, because minutes before her outburst she’d been dishing the dirt on corruption and shoddy reporting at *The Post*. Something about the paper collaborating with the State Department to send reporters with questionable loyalties in Middle Eastern hot zones. Yes, America. This happens. And you buy the tripe they beam back home. Stop buying.

My big wake-up call came when I read a book by Frances Stonor Saunders, called *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters*. Frances is a thoroughly establishment figure who feels

betrayed by the revolution. Orwell would probably feel the same way if he were alive today.

Anyway, what is great about Frances' book is that it lists many media personalities who also happened to work for the CIA or MI6 (or both!!).

Now I don't want the spooks to get a big head, there are other ways to be vetted and approved. But regular people get a little uncomfortable when they realize how many BIG NAMES got exposure on TV, in publishing, the music industry or the Arts by riding on the coat-tails of quasi-legal organizations like the secret services.

So, along with my short story analysis challenge, I'm going to start a neat little list of Famous People who are Spooks. (And by 'spook' I mean people who took money from any government for propaganda work or intelligence gathering.) I hope that by reading this, a few new readers will begin to have adversarial thoughts about the folks on the screen. I'm not going to put up every spook today, but I will add to the list as I have time and energy. Enjoy! And please, ask "Who's talking to me?"

Famous People who are Spooks.

Leslie Howard (British Gov.)

A.A. Milne (British Gov.)

Ernest Hemingway (OSS/CIA)

Jackson Pollock (OSS/CIA)

Malcom Muggeridge (MI6/CIA)

Herbert Marcuse (OSS/CIA)

Julia Child (and her husband) (OSS/CIA)

Roald Dahl (British Gov/OSS)

Ian Flemming (British Gov/OSS)

Marlene Dietrich (OSS/CIA)

C.S. Forrester (British Gov/OSS)

Mark Rothko (OSS/CIA)

Cecil B. DeMille (CIA)

Peter Matthiessen (CIA)

James Michener (CIA)

Howard Hunt (CIA)

Eugene Fodor (OSS/CIA)

Somerset Maugham (British Secret Service)

Graham Green (MI5)

Crompton Mackenzie (MI5)

John Hunt (novelist, CIA)

Aaron Copland (CIA)

Alban Berg (Work promoted by CIA– thank you "rg")

Igor Stravinsky (CIA)

Benjamin Britten (CIA)

Virgil Thomson (CIA)

Leontyne Price (CIA)

Ignazio Silone (CIA)

Alexander Korda (CIA/MI6)

Lord Victor Rothschild (CIA/MI6)

Frederic Warburg (That's Orwell's Warburg) (CIA/MI6)

Irving Kristol (CIA)

Stephen Spender (MI6)

Nancy Mitford (CIA)

Isiah Berlin (CIA)

Vladimir Nabokov (CIA)

Jayaprakash Narayan (CIA)

Arnold Toynbee (CIA)

Bertrand Russell (CIA)

Hugh Trevor-Roper (CIA)

Arthur Schlesinger (CIA)

Arthur Koestler (CIA)

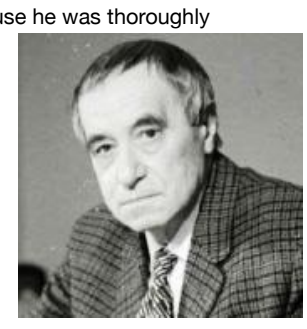
George Orwell (MI6)

Maybe that's enough for one day… stay tuned!

2 COMMENTS

WAL*MART

Today's short story is by the George Orwell of Soviet literature, Valentin Katayev. An Odessa native with a Hapsburg jaw, he trod the fine line between acceptable and unacceptable criticism of the Soviet government, and he did so well enough to never get into trouble.



Katayev stayed in good graces because he was thoroughly establishment– just like George Orwell. Having fought in the Red Army, Katayev worked in the Russian Telegraph Agency, which was the state news agency. He was then employed as a reporter in Odessa, and finally in Moscow as a propagandist for the Railway Workers' Union broadsheet, *Gudok*. (Mikhail Bulgakov worked for this outfit also, albeit unhappily.)

Katayev enjoyed a celebrated literary career in Soviet Russia; he seemed to be unphased by the Soviet government's starvation of 4 million of his fellow Ukrainians in the early thirties. Nothing like government work for the willfully ignorant.

But ugly people can write beautifully, and that's why I'm talking about Mr. Katayev today. His short story, *The Suicide*, is a masterful example of fable-writing. The pace, tone and use of language could have come straight out of *The Brothers' Grimm.* There's also a twist at the end, which works because (again!) it is a natural, yet exceptionally insightful, consequence to the situation our protagonist finds himself in.

Rundown: A nameless citizen is disillusioned with Soviet realities and wants to hang himself. Everything is going according to plan, until his chair brakes and he can't nail in the hook for his noose. *Dastard Woodworkers' Trust!* When he comes to hammer in his nail, the nail shatters. *Zero quality control!*

Citizen decides to hang himself from the chandelier, because that is from the old regime and he knows he can trust it. The chandelier holds, but his rope breaks…

Citizen tries to bash his head against the wall, but tumbles through into the street outside instead. Citizen tries to poison himself with acetic acid, but it tastes like summer wine. Quite tasty.

Having drunk lots of Soviet acetic acid, the Citizen begins to feel better about life, so he calls to his house maid for more acid and a sausage. The sausage poisons him.

Katayev uses simple, direct language with no extraneous information. At least half of the story is told through the citizen talking to himself: it's told as quoted speech. No paragraph is more than three sentences long and most are shorter. Katayev uses a lot of onomatopoeia, which is excellent for storytelling. (Orwell also thought that sound-words were important in boys' literature.)

There's plenty of emotional roller-coaster here too. Citizen goes from despair, to anger, to despair, to joy and then finally to a humorous death. It doesn't get much more wild than that.

All in all, it seems as though Katayev is writing for the busy commuter on the Metro, who has no more than 60% of his attention span free at any time. *The Suicide* is a child's story for adults.

The point of *The Suicide* is to lampoon the Soviet government's failed attempts at quality control; Katayev makes the daring point that at least under the Tsar some things worked.

Thank God that globalization and Wal-Mart have saved the free world from a similar fate.

LEAVE A COMMENT

TWO SCATTERED THOUGHTS

Reading Donald Sturrock's biography of Roald Dahl left me with respect for Tessa Dahl. Tessa is Roald's eldest surviving daughter. She grew up trapped between her mother and father's gargantuan egos.

Tessa was spoiled; not so much materially, but because she was given very little guidance or rules growing up. She was old enough to be

wounded by the dysfunction that Roald and Pat hid behind a facade of cheerfulness. I imagine that at times she felt like the only sane person around, while sycophants and gold-diggers flattered her parents' vanity. She still loved her parents though, and saw what good there was in them.

Roald, and his gross paramour Liccy, put Tessa in a very difficult position. When Tessa found out about their affair, they gave the teenager an ultimatum: you can destroy the family by telling Pat or shut up so that we can be happy.

I can't think of a more ugly thing for a father to do.

So despite Tessa's failings and eccentricities, she seems to be the Dahl with the most principles. She eventually did tell her mother about Roald's affair, despite Liccy and Roald's emotional blackmail. She also encouraged Dahl in his support of the Palestinians– something very forward-thinking for the time.

Oh yeah, and Tessa was the one who found a British publisher for *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*; as a schoolgirl she was able to accomplish something that her father's difficult nature prevented him from doing.

Second thought: I got an email from Duotrope this morning, trying to get me to pay for a subscription.

For those of you who don't know, Duotrope was a free online forum where authors would volunteer information about how different literary magazines treat submissions. You could find out the average length of time before editors would reply, for example.

Duotrope decided to start charging for this information on Jan 1st of this year. Their business model is this: get authors to give submission information for free and then charge authors to read it.

I dunno. Duotrope was the best outlet for this information, but it had very little data about the vast majority of magazines, and what info they did have was skewed towards accepted work. I used to donate info; but not anymore.

Perhaps now that they're charging authors, Duotrope will give something back by paying for information? This way they could solve their skewed-information problem. A quarter for information about each submission, perhaps? Maybe a full dollar for information following the entire submit-acknowledge-reject/accept cycle? It's a thought. Perhaps with a better product they won't have to spam me for cash.

Never eat alone.

LEAVE A COMMENT

THE TERRIBLE TWIST

Could be a psychic, entertainer, psychologist, financial wizard…

Today I'm not going to review a short story, but a movie that failed because its writing was lousy.

Red Lights was both written and directed by Rodrigo Cortés, who can certainly pull big-name talent to his projects. I hope that next time he spends as much energy attracting quality writers as actors.

The problem with Cortés' script is summed up by *The Miami Herald's* Gene Rodriguez:

> *With the sort of last-minute plot twist that sank M. Night Shyamalan's career, Red Lights comes to an unexpected, risible end.*

Story matters, and directors have no business making movies if they can't tell a good story from a bad one.

Quick rundown:

Sigourney Weaver is a psychologist who works with a physicist, Cillian Murphy, to debunk faith healers, psychics, etc.

Robert De Niro, the sinister psychic Mr. Silver, had something to do with the death of one of his critics, which forced him into retirement many years ago. There's bad blood between Weaver and De Niro: De Niro humiliated Weaver on T.V. when they were younger.

Instead of seeking revenge, Weaver realizes that DeNiro is actually a dangerous man, and she decides to stay away from him when he makes a 'comeback'. Her green sidekick, Murphy, can't resist investigating De Niro and ends up debunking De Niro's performance.

The big twist? Well, Murphy is himself psychic. He's attracted to debunking as a means to find other people like himself. We find this out at the very end, though clumsy hints are dropped throughout the film.

What makes a hint clumsy? Well, take this one for instance. A female student asks Murphy how his mentor Weaver will answer a question. Murphy correctly anticipates how Weaver answers. The student is shocked: "How did you know that, Mr. Murphy?" Murphy's answer: "I'm psychic." Then he beds his student.

Groan.

It's a shame that Cortez can't write, because this movie had a lot of things going for it. The characters of Mr. Silver and Weaver's Dr. Matheson were promising. Silver (De Niro) is the type of man we should all revile: the type that searches out human weaknesses to exploit. Matheson (Weaver) is a thoughtful character, who's grown out of her youthful omnipotence and discovered that she is just as vulnerable as the simple people she'd set out to enlighten.

If this had been a film about demagogues and human frailty, it might have been a truly inspired work of art. Instead, it sits on the fence about the interesting issues, and tries to entertain with a stupid twist. We need fresh blood in Hollywood.

So how would I improve this film?

If Murphy must be psychic, then let us know this from the very start. Let his relationship with Weaver grow from her realization about her own limitations. Let Murphy represent hope for Weaver.

Murphy's struggle with De Niro ought to be an open one. De Niro plays a disgusting character, a character who is willfully evil and who fears what Murphy can do to him. Let De Niro's fear be based on his one redeeming quality: a twisted sort of humility. De Niro is humble enough to understand that there are forces which, at very least, seem supernatural. De Niro should recognize these forces in Murphy and know that Murphy could use these forces to destroy him. Let De Niro believe that he must destroy Murphy first.

Murphy's conundrum should be this: he could do things the easy way, by using his superpowers to make De Niro squeal; or the hard way, the way that requires everybody to grow, through reason and science.

Let the meat of the story be about how De Niro is consumed by the forces he exploits. All you need for a satisfying ending is De Niro's exposure.

There you go! Free of charge.

There were a couple of other points to this story that made me chuckle. Firstly, Cillian Murphy better be careful about being boxed in as a psychologist/psychiatrist/parapsychologist. That's an awful lot of spooky for one guy.

Secondly, there are plenty of sacred cows in the 'respectable' sciences like physics, and let's be generous, psychology. These cows need toppling. Of course, it's much more dangerous professionally for psychologists and physicists to go after these issues. The wacko psychics are an easier target. However, I see more danger in the lies that universities tell than those that are told by small-time con-men.

4 COMMENTS

ELIAS AND THE DRAUG

The Draug.

My foray into the netherworld last week sidetracked me from my reading mission. So I'm catching a demon on the way back up.

Elias and the Draug, sometimes translated as *The Fisherman and the Draug*, is a supernatural tale by Norwegian writer Jonas Lie.

This is a frightening story; not because of ghosts or murders, but because Elias slips into madness. In fact, I didn't realize that Elias had become part of the Draug until he sacrifices his family during a boat-race. This is either a story about possession or the demon-like nature of obsession.

That's all very well, but why does it *work?*

Firstly, spare prose. This story is like the Grimms' tales; the language is direct and Lie only tells us what we need to know. Each paragraph follows the next, there are no detours or weird time jumps. Within 200 words, Elias' seals his fate by wounding the Draug, a supernatural seal. The rest of the story is told in anticipation of the catastrophe that we know will happen.

Lie's hook is that anticipation. The Draug will find Elias. But how?

We're told immediately. The Draug will get his revenge through Elias' obsession with bigger, better boats. We know that when Elias buys the best boat around, the Draug is not far off.

But wait. For all this to keep the reader's attention, we have to care about Elias. Lie paints a sympathetic character in one paragraph, 75 words into the story.

Elias is a poor fisherman, who works and saves to better himself, while at the same time struggling to bring up a large family. Elias isn't a selfish man, and readers can take some joy in his success as he gradually starts his own fishing business. But Elias' one point of weakness, his pride in his boat, will be his fall. Lie's hero is bittersweet from the first page.

I'm sure that not everybody will find Elias sympathetic. I did. Probably Lie did. Since you can't please everybody all the time, I think it's best to write for people who think like you do. I used to shoot for 'generally sympathetic lead', in hopes that such a character would give my writing wide appeal. Hence, my heroes are dog-owners and the parents of cute toddlers. That's insipid. I'm only going to entertain people who are on the same wavelength as I am, so it's better to take a small stand with a character like Elias. PETA be damned.

The swiftness of Lie's story promises quick resolution, and we get it. The longest part of the tale is Lie's description of *how* the Draug takes his revenge by spurring the (temporarily) insane Elias to kill his family one by one.

Recap: Lie promises revenge on the first page. Readers who were hooked by 'revenge' weren't disappointed. The bulk of the story delivers that revenge.

The Draug's revenge is psychologically intense. I didn't appreciate how far into Hell Elias had slipped until he tells his wife to brace for the loss of another child *just so that he can keep in the race with the Draug.* That's what makes the story spooky. Half way through, you realized you're in a boat with a madman.

Will Elias persist in this insanity?

One by one the children go, and the wife, until only Elias' eldest son is left. Then Elias snaps out of it- he realizes what he has done. That's the final torture. Elias sacrifices himself to save his last son, and lets go into the dark. The son makes land, but never sails again.

So not only has Elias lost his prize boat, but he's lost his legacy as well. The Draug demands a heavy price for one instance of spiritual blindness.

The only extraneous part of this story is the Finn girl, who Lie clearly stuck in as a lesson for Norwegians about tolerance. She's clunky and we don't need her, but apart from that, the pace and trauma of this story are perfectly executed.

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